

# CATO

## INSTITUTE

### MEMORANDUM

**FROM:** Randal O'Toole  
**RE:** Response Inquiry 1  
**DATE:** September 15, 2020

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#### Inquiry 1

COVID-19 has completely changed transportation patterns in the United States, and Americans are not likely to return to pre-pandemic habits even when a cure or vaccine is found. The biggest change is the huge increase in the number of people working at home, from roughly 5 to roughly 40 percent. After the pandemic is over many of those people will return to their workplaces at least part time, but it is likely that at least 15 to 20 percent of people will be working at home on any given day.

The second-biggest change is the huge decline in the use of mass transportation of all kinds. Masks and similar measures can reduce the changes of disease transmission, but people are least likely to be infected during travel if they rely on their own personal transportation. Even after the pandemic, many people will continue to be suspicious of mass transportation due to flu and other viruses.

Because of people's wariness of mass transportation and despite the increase in the number of people working at home, motor vehicle travel has proven to be the most resilient form of transportation we have. In April, public transit ridership declined by 84 percent from April 2019 while driving declined by only 40 percent. By July, public transit ridership was still 65 percent below the previous July, while driving had returned almost to pre-pandemic levels. With more people working at home, many are likely to move further away from what previously was their place of work. This will reduce congestion in city centers but potentially increase it in suburbs or exurban areas.

Although driving has rebounded, congestion has not. The increase in the number of people working at home has reduced rush-hour traffic without reducing total motor vehicle travel. It appears that people working at home continue to drive as much as they did when they commuted; they just do it at different times of the day.